

HARRY VAN DER LINDEN

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**Kantian Ethics  
and Socialism**

# **Kantian Ethics and Socialism**

Awarded the 1985 Johnsonian Prize  
in Philosophy

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and Socialism**

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## *To Anne*

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## PREFACE

Around the turn of the century the neo-Kantian socialist Hermann Cohen wrote in his Introduction and Critical Epilogue to Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism* that Kant "is the true and real originator of German socialism."<sup>1</sup> His claim, of course, is not to be taken too literally. After all, Kant to a large extent defended the minimal state and accepted the emerging capitalist market economy, whereas socialists have typically rejected both. Rather, the point of Cohen's challenging statement is that Kant's practical philosophy contains moral and philosophical-historical insights crucial to socialist thought and that his notion of the highest good, or moral society of colegislators who seek to enhance one another's ends, can be extrapolated to set forth the demand for the socialist ideal. Thus the statement suggests a conception of socialism that is ethical in nature and involves not a mere denial of liberal thought but rather its critical extension in the form of economic democracy. A final aspect of Cohen's claim which needs to be stressed is its implicit criticism of Marx on the grounds that a morally defensible socialism is an ethical socialism and that the philosophical foundations of a tenable socialism are to be sought in Kant, not in Hegel.

These issues are the focus of the present study. In Part One, I offer a critical reconstruction of the central role in Kant's work of the duty to promote the highest good as a social duty, arguing that this duty is to be interpreted as comprising the moral requirement that we seek the republican state and international peace. Thus I place politics, history, social conflict, and the moral commitment to change society at the core of Kant's practical philosophy, attempting to undercut the view of his ethics as primarily concerned with the struggle between individual duty and inclination. Although my reconstruction in its basic orientation is influenced by Cohen and the Kant interpretation of the Marburg School in general, I present a new systematic examination of the social dimension in



Kant's practical philosophy, taking into account much current literature on or relevant to this topic. It is my hope that this reconstruction will be judged not only in terms of its possible significance for socialist thought but also in terms of its discussion of elements of Kant's practical philosophy which presently receive insufficient philosophical attention.

In Part Two, I turn to Cohen's transformation of Kant's ethics into a socialist ethics. My discussion aims to show that Cohen's social and moral thought has been unjustly neglected ever since it was effectively repressed by the wave of racist and fascist philosophy in the 1920s and '30s in Germany. I examine his practical work in some detail, emphasizing his idea that the socialist society of producer cooperatives instantiates, or best approximates, the moral ideal of the community of legislators. My study ends by offering an extensive Kantian analysis and critique of Marx's view of morality, concluding that Marxist thought can greatly profit from making Kantian ethics its moral foundation. In a word, I argue that this is a tenable enterprise, because Marx and Kantian socialist ethics share a common basic evaluative outlook, and a much needed enterprise because, much to the damage of the socialist cause, Marx denied that action toward the socialist ideal must be a *moral* praxis. Here again my approach is not historical; the major exception to this is my discussion of Cohen's perceptive critique of Marx's materialist conception of history. My main reason for taking this approach is that the Kantian socialists and their critics at the time were unfamiliar with a large part of the Marxian corpus, such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. I have added, however, an appendix with a historical note on Kantian ethical socialism, in the expectation that this may contribute to a better understanding of some of the philosophical and political concerns expressed in the text.

That the duty to promote the highest good is to be understood as a social duty is also argued by Yirmiahu Yovel in his *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. Notwithstanding some essential interpretative disagreements, my study is greatly indebted to his work. Our objectives, however, are quite different. Yovel's main purpose is to elucidate history as a fundamental category in Kant's critical system as a whole, whereas my primary aim (in Part One) is not only to expose but also to assess critically and develop further the ramifications of Kant's idea that the highest good sets a moral task for humanity. Thus I do not hesitate to make explicit what is merely implicit in Kant's practical writings, adding my own arguments where necessary, and even to traverse roads he hinted at but never

took. An example of the former is my argument that the duty to promote the highest good can be derived from the different formulations of the categorical imperative. An example of the latter is my discussion of a variety of moral problems that arise from Kant's turn to the idea of historical progress for the sake of praxis aimed at the highest good, such as the question whether we can uphold the dignity experienced in the fulfillment of our social duties once we realize that future generations may hold that our efforts fell short of the ideal because they may have a different conception of the demands of the moral law. To give one more illustration, I argue that although Kant's notion of respect for the moral law does not capture the emotive components of the moral commitment (the "good will") to change society, it is nonetheless the case that his theory of moral feeling offers an adequate conceptual apparatus for examining some emotive elements of this type of commitment which are mentioned but not analyzed in his historical writings, such as moral indignation about present social conditions and moral enthusiasm engendered by progressive political events. These examples, it may be noted, underline the reconstructive nature of my Kant discussion and also illustrate that Kant's ethics is important for ethical socialism as a philosophy of praxis.

In the course of this discussion I occasionally criticize some aspects of other Kant interpretations. These criticisms take on two basic forms that should not be confused: strong and weak claims. A *strong* claim in this context is the contention that a certain author misinterprets what I consider to be Kant's view. The point of my strong claims is, of course, to raise interesting problems and questions for my own reconstruction. A *weak* claim is here to be understood as an argument that a certain author fails to recognize that the Kantian text contains another *relevant* reading besides the one he or she in fact offers. It goes without saying that my choice to elaborate precisely this other possible reading reflects my purpose of developing Kant's practical philosophy as a crucial step toward an adequate Kantian socialist ethics. This raises the following question: Why did Kant not take the direction that I, all things considered, think he should have taken? Or, to put the matter more bluntly, why did Kant not become an ethical socialist, not in word but in spirit? In addressing the reasons for his different philosophical and political orientation I use in effect the same kind of distinctions and selection criteria that guide my criticisms of various Kant interpretations. Thus I argue, for instance, that Kant's nearly total rejection of all forms of political resistance is inconsistent on his own terms (a strong claim), and I maintain that the



basic premises of his doctrine of the highest good do not necessitate his view that the moral society itself cannot be institutionally expressed and must be seen as an "inner" unification of good wills (a weak claim). Both strong and weak claims play, moreover, a role in my discussion of his commitment to the minimal state and capitalist economy. And again, the scope and intent of my criticisms is ultimately circumscribed by my over-all aim of constructing a viable Kantian socialist ethics.

My final preliminary comment concerns my argument throughout this study that morality, with its motivational, corrective (placing moral constraints upon social action), and directive (steering this action toward proper ideals) functions, is a *sine qua non* for a defensible socialist theory and praxis. This argument must not be equated, as many Marxists tend to do, with some kind of voluntaristic plea, whistling democratic socialism in the capitalist darkness. Mediation is important, as I stress at several points in the text, and the question must be addressed how under the present social and political circumstances socialist values can be promoted and realized. The primary task of a philosophical study, however, is to raise the question, not to answer it.

\* \* \* \*

This study owes more to my teacher and friend Steven S. Schwarzschild than I have been able to express in my notes to his work. He initiated my interest in Kantian socialism, strongly influenced my Kant interpretation, and gave his expertise and commitment to the execution and completion of this study. I would like to express my deep gratitude for his generous assistance. I would also like to thank Edward F. McClennen, whose incisive comments contributed to improving the first chapter. Sidney Morgenbesser and Thomas W. Pogge were so kind as to send literature relevant to my study, and their perceptive comments and suggestions were very helpful in writing its final version. My discussions with Daniel E. Wueste were a stimulus to sharpening my own Kantian viewpoint. Thanks also go to my parents, as well as to Rita Adler, Robert B. Barrett, Scott Bodfish, Claude J. Evans, Stanley L. Paulson, and Carl P. Wellman for their encouraging words and various other forms of support.

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Harry van der Linden

Hamilton, New York  
August 1987

## NOTE ON REFERENCES

Most references to Kant's works are made in abbreviated form, to their English translations. In general, references to his works are followed by the corresponding volume and page numbers from *Immanuel Kants Werke*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, and published by Bruno Cassirer, Berlin (1912–22). Single references are given if either no current translation is available or a translated work of Kant is not included in the Cassirer edition. In the case of *Critique of Judgment*, paragraph numbers are also provided. No changes have been made in the translations except where it is so stated.

Abbreviated references to the works of Hermann Cohen are limited to the two of his writings that are most significant for my study. All passages cited in the text and notes from his nontranslated works are my translations unless noted otherwise.

Listed below are the abbreviations of the works of Kant and Cohen as employed in the text and notes. All their other cited works can be found in *Works Cited*.

### Abbreviations

#### IMMANUEL KANT

<i>Anthropology</i>	<i>Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i> , translated by Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). Cassirer edition: Volume VIII.
<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Critique of Judgment</i> , translated by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951). Cassirer edition: Volume V.
<i>Practical Reason</i>	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i> , translated by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956). Cassirer edition: Volume V.
<i>Pure Reason</i>	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> , translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965). Cassirer edition: Volume III.



- Virtue*                      *The Doctrine of Virtue*, translated by Mary J. Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964). Translation of Part II of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cassirer edition: Volume VII.
- Foundations*              *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959). Cassirer edition: Volume IV.
- Justice*                     *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, translated by John Ladd (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965). Incomplete translation of Part I of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cassirer edition: Volume VII.
- On the Old Saw*           *On the Old Saw: That May Be Right in Theory but It Won't Work in Practice*, translated by E. B. Ashton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974). Cassirer edition: Volume VI.
- Peace*                      *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, translated by Lewis White Beck in Kant, *On History*, edited by Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963). Beck fails to mention the subtitle. Cassirer edition: Volume VI.
- Religion*                   *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Cassirer edition: Volume VI.
- "An Old Question"      "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?", translated by Robert E. Anchor in Kant, *On History*. Part II of *The Strife of the Faculties*. Cassirer edition: Volume VII.
- "Conjectural Beginning"      "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," translated by Emil L. Fackenheim in Kant, *On History*. Cassirer edition: Volume IV.
- "Universal History"      "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," translated by Lewis White Beck in Kant, *On History*. Cassirer edition: Volume IV.



## HERMANN COHEN

*Pure Will*

*Ethik des reinen Willens* (Ethics of the Pure Will), reprinted in Cohen, *Werke*, Volume VII, Part II, edited by Hermann Cohen Archives at the University of Zurich, published by Georg Olms Verlag (Hildesheim/New York, 1981). Reprinted from the 2nd edition (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1907). The first edition appeared in 1904.

## "Critical Epilogue"

"Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zu Langes *Geschichte des Materialismus*" ("Introduction and Critical Epilogue to Lange's *History of Materialism*"), in Cohen, *Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte*, Volume II, edited by Albert Görland and Ernst Cassirer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1928). Reprinted from the 9th edition of Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism* (1914).